

## CHAPTER THREE

### PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN A KWAHU LINEAGE

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It has become a truism to state that the family in Africa is gradually drifting away from its original extended form to a more conjugal type. It has also become a truism to put some intriguing question marks after this first statement. In this paper we shall look at the members of one matrilineage, how they have organised their families and how this affects processes of child-care and socialization. The lineage under study is based in a small town on the Kwahu Plateau, about 100 miles north of Accra.

#### 1. 'Marriage'

Students of social science who hold that the African extended family is developing toward the conjugal family, usually refer to the elites as being in the vanguard of social change. There is indeed no doubt that the elites as clear families are becoming increasingly more functionally individuated. Two studies in particular have demonstrated this for the Ghanaian scene, one by Caldwell (1968) and one by Oppong (1970) although the latter, at the same time, found some very traditional extended family features among them. It is, however, a little precipitate to assume that the elites reveal a general future trend of family change in Ghana. It is even unlikely that this is so. Class distinctions in Ghana are rather sharp and although this, surprisingly—has not yet produced considerable feelings of animosity between the haves and have-nots, and social mobility is relatively easy, the masses as a whole will find it difficult to imitate the elitist style of life since they lack, *inter alia*, the necessary financial means to do so.

It seems therefore that we have to look for other signs, if we want to predict future developments of family life in Ghana. An obvious choice is the younger generation among the "ordinary" people. What are the ideas and attitudes of these people toward marriage and family life and what are their practices?

The lineage with which we are concerned numbers 24 people who are between 17 and 28 years. (Four of them have been left out of our discussion because we do not have sufficient information about them.) Almost all have attended school, but quite a few of them have not completed their education. Some ran away in the first years of primary school, some at a later stage, and others had to stop because of pregnancy. Only one had secondary school education. In this regard they are probably a good cross-section of their generation.

Ideas and expectations concerning marriage and family were expressed by only a few of them, but we have reason to believe that the opinions of the others are not dissimilar. Those who expressed themselves had (too) high expectations of marriage as a durable bond between two

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people and conjured up a picture of marriage very similar to that of the elite. To quote one of them: "I want to marry one wife, to discuss matters with her and bring forth children. Both of us will put our resources together to look after them so that, when we are away (have died), they can live happily."

The reality is, however, quite different. Almost all these 20 people are actively engaged in some kind of liaison: they have a partner or are "studying" a partner or are trying to find one in a "hit-and-miss manner," but only four of them are presently married customarily. Some contracted customary marriages before but decided to stop. Their experiences are presented in the next two cases.

#### *Case 1. A Marriage without a Husband*

When Abena Cecilia was 16 years old and still attending middle school, she was made pregnant by a student in secondary school. The case was brought before the elders and they pressed the two into a customary marriage. Their "marriage" lasted about two years, but, according to informants, the two never met again as husband and wife. The boy did not contribute toward the upkeep of the baby neither did he come to visit it. Their marriage was finally dissolved and the family of the boy promised to pay every month one cedi (1) to Cecilia to be used for the child. Cecilia's own mother is dead. She has been staying with several relatives since then, but never very long with the same person. Her child has always been with her. At present she is staying in Accra with a distant relative of hers.

#### *Case 2. The Young Polygamist*

Kofi Asante has settled as a driver at Sunyani. When he was about 18 he had a girlfriend, but the girl's mother interfered and sent her to Kumasi. He then met another girl from Sunyani and married her according to custom. When, some time later the first girl returned Asante still loved her and took her as his second wife. Thus he became a polygamist at the age of 20. One of his wives stayed in a room of the same compound as he, the other elsewhere in town, but the two prepared meals together and Asante took his meals with his two wives. The experiment lasted about three years. He had a quarrel with his second wife and divorced her. "On that occasion" he said, "I realised that I was still a child and could not have two wives." Some time later he also divorced his first wife.

It seems Asante has not learned much from his first experiences, because at the moment he is again married to two wives. The first one is slightly older than he is, and had already three children before he married her. The second he married after he had impregnated her during the *postpartum* period of his first wife. Asante is now 25.

Asante, who is now in his fourth customary marriage is however definitely an exception, because most of the 20 young people to be precise 12—have never entered customary marriage at all, although some may have two or even three children. A few have (or had) a more or less stable relationship with a partner. The partner is known by the relatives and the two visit each other openly. They may even stay together, either permanently or temporarily, but this applies to only a few of our cases. The type of relationship is popularly called *Mpena Awadee*, although in a strict sense, this refers only to a union of which the customs have partly been fulfilled (Denteh, 1972:8). We have translated this term with: Free Marriage. Case 3 gives an example of a free marriage, but it should be borne in mind that free marriage can take many different forms.

### *Case 3. A Co-residential Free Marriage*

When Kwame Amoa was teaching Form 3 of the middle school, he made a girl of Form 4 pregnant. The girl, who was from Brong Ahafo, was staying with some relatives in the town. She was very troublesome to them and as soon as the pregnancy was discovered they drove her out of the house, forcing her to stay with Amoa. Amoa was made to pay a huge fine for seducing the schoolgirl. They managed to get rid of the pregnancy through an abortion and, 5 months later, Amoa further managed to get rid of the girl herself, after many quarrels had taken place. Amoa never paid any marriage fee, but for 5 months the girl was staying with him and cooking for him.

The majority of the younger generation are engaged in what we have termed Lover Relationships. A veil of secrecy envelopes their meetings and only a few insiders know about it. Such a relationship may remain hidden for quite some time till it breaks off or comes into the open because of pregnancy. Abortion—usually performed by some quack who calls himself dispenser—is often the result. A lover relationship can also be a stage in a process leading to free marriage, but in many cases it is not. The relationship presented in the following case, for example, broke off when the girl moved to another town.

### *Case 4. Love During Evening Studies*

Kwabena Tano: "At that time I had my own room where we used to meet. Nobody knew that we were making love together. People thought we were studying. Her own relatives thought she was studying with one of her girl-friends, but her friend took her to me (laughter)."

Finally, not less than five of the 12 women in the sample are prostitutes in Accra. The proportion looks very high and we have no idea how representative they are for their other Kwahu sisters, but several informants assured us that the number of prostitutes and semi-prostitutes is extremely high among young female immigrants in Accra. There are indications that some of these five women entertain lover relationships, but it is difficult to decide whether these people should be called "lovers" or "regular customers."

This brief description of sexual unions among the younger generation show that the situation is a rather complex one. Research among them was painstaking and it was not possible to work simply with questionnaires. Interviews frequently took the form of an ordinary conversation which was taped and later on transcribed. It is hard to categorize some of the unions and even harder to interpret them. Should the liaisons described above be considered as necessary experiences in the mate selection process, which will soon be ended when the people enter a more regular union of customary marriage, or do they have a more permanent character? Wider investigations among both young and older members of the lineage (Bleek, 1972:162-7) strongly suggest that free marriage and lover relationships are establishing themselves as alternatives for customary marriage. A few of the older members expressed the view that they had been disappointed with marriage and several had resorted to a looser type of sexual union. It is therefore not unlikely that a considerable proportion of the young will not enter a regular customary marriage or, if they do so, divorce again and not return to customary marriage. Divorce, it was found, was very frequent in the lineage, compared to available figures of other societies (Bleek, 1972:192).

The Kwahu situation bears a striking resemblance to family structures in the West Indies. Although sexual experiences start very early in life, people marry remarkably late. G. W. Roberts found that men in Jamaica marry at the age of 34.1 in average and females at the age of 28.6 years (Roberts, 1957:293). Relationships before marriage vary from common-law marriage,

concubinage and casual meeting to promiscuity and prostitution. Judith Blake remarks that men especially are reluctant to marry because the married life has few advantages and many disadvantages in comparison with the unmarried life for them. In Jamaica, she writes, "a man is deprived of neither regular sexual association nor feminine companionship by remaining single. Young girls can, it appears, be seduced with relative ease and their seduction may even be facilitated if the man is considerably older and of high economic status." (Blake, 1961:142)

In the Kwahu case also, young girls are easily seduced and, as a result, are burdened with a child before they realize it and before they have started looking for a serious partner. Ten of the 12 females in our sample have brought forth and one, a girl of 17, is pregnant. The average age of bringing forth for the first time is between 17 and 18 years. If we add the girl who is pregnant, four of the 11 women claim that they were married customarily before they became pregnant, but we suspect that the real number is two. Six of the 11 did however marry the father of their first child later on, but three divorced him again.

Once a woman has a child, she is in a disadvantageous position, because most men prefer a wife who has not yet brought forth. To say, therefore, that young girls enter sexual unions to prove their fertility and thus to become a more attractive partner is not correct. Early pregnancies are probably mainly due to lack of sex education. In a couple of cases it was found that a girl was rather hiding the fact that she had a child by leaving it with her mother.

The developments here described should not be considered as something entirely new, a product of this modern, permissive age. These developments have some very deep roots in Akan tradition, where strong marital ties were looked at askance as a threat to the unity of the lineage and faithfulness to the lineage was a greater virtue than marital fidelity. In the same way, among the present generation, lineage ties play a more prominent role than marital relations. This shows itself particularly in residence patterns. Only three of the 20 young people are living with their partners and their children in the same house (room). Most of the others are residing with relatives. Even in Accra they have grouped themselves according to kinship ties. There are four main nuclei of relatives to which people moving to Accra usually turn for residence. It indicates that, in contrast to the urban elite, for the ordinary man in the city very often kinship and not "marriage"—whatever type—may be the basis of residence. It makes the urban residence pattern look very much like the one at home in Kwahu where wives rarely stay with their husbands as long as their own relatives are around (Bleck, 1973).

The question that presents itself here is: what are the implications of this situation for the bringing up of children born out of these unions?

## **2. Parents and Children**

The 20 people under study have an average age of almost 23 years. One has four children and three have no child. If we omit abortions, still-births and children that have died, their total number of children is 30, which is an average of 1.5 children for each.

We estimate that 11 of these children were born entirely outside customary marriage, five before customary marriage and 14 in customary marriage. We say "estimate" because it proved hard to get exact information on this. We can think of two main reasons. The first is that several of the younger generation are living elsewhere, for example in Accra or Akosombo, and the relatives do not really know very much about their activities. If it concerns a female member of the family most people know the exact number of her children, but seem a bit at a loss if you ask them about her "marriages." When it concerns a male member even the number of children

is often not known, and rather close relatives disagree with each other about it. This is a logical result of the biological facts of childbirth, but it also shows that the traditional view that the children belong to the matrilineage and not to the husband, is still alive. According to some old people the role of a father was even more important in the past than it seems to be now among young people. This point we shall discuss however later on.

The second reason is that certain informants pretend that a particular person was married when she or he got the child while this was not true. It does not necessarily mean that the idea of "illegitimate children" is being introduced, but that a child should have a recognized **genitor** or biological father. Although a child belongs automatically to its mother's lineage, people consider it a "shame" when it is born fatherless.

The most appropriate way of studying relationships between parents and children is probably to base oneself at the residence of the child. Residence patterns are, however, very fluid and it is difficult to determine the residence of children. For example, during one visit a child is recorded as staying with the mother, but at the second, it is found that the child is staying with the mother's mother, because the mother has travelled to Accra or the village. Another possibility is that on one occasion the child is found in Accra, and at another time, in the Kwahu home town. Residence on the part of the child becomes usually more stable when it starts attending school, but school-going can also have the opposite effect: a mother may decide to leave her child behind when she has to move, in order not to interrupt its education. Case 5 below is a typical example of residential mobility of children.

#### *Case 5. Nkwanta's Child*

Amma Nkwanta became pregnant when she was about 14 or 15. It was her first intercourse after her first menstruation. The father of the child, a teacher, never married her. She gave birth to a boy in her Kwahu hometown and nursed him till he was weaned at the age of one-and-a-half years. She then left the child with her mother and went to Accra. The grandmother looked after the child for one year till Nkwanta collected the child from her and took it with her to Accra. But after six months, when the child was about three years old, Nkwanta brought him again back to her mother in Kwahu. The boy was however very troublesome and after another six months the grandmother decided to send the child again back to Nkwanta in Accra. The boy stayed in Accra till he reached school-going age and returned to his grandmother in Kwahu to start school. Since that time the boy who is now seven has been staying with his grandmother but has been visiting his mother a few times during holidays. Occasionally also Nkwanta comes to Kwahu to stay there for a few weeks and keeps the child with her.

For this paper we only recorded the present residence of a child if this residence had a more or less permanent character.

Table 1 shows that only 6 of the 30 children were staying with both parents, 13 were with their mother, 3 with their father, and 5 with their maternal grandmother. All children below two years were with their mother or both parents. Of the 13 children from 2 to 5 years not less than 9 were staying with their mother or both parents. Above 6 years child-dispersal suddenly increases: only 2 were still with their mother and only one with both parents. Contrary to expectations, the father did not play a significant role here either (only 2). The highest number of children were staying with the mother's mother (4).

With reference to the set of young people studied albeit small in number, we want to make the following careful observations:

TABLE 1: AGE AND RESIDENCE OF CHILDREN

<i>Residence With</i>	<i>Age</i>			<i>Total</i>
	0-1	2-5	6-12	
Parents	3	2	1	6
Mother	4	7	2	13
Father	a	1	2	3
Mother's mother	a	1	4	5
Father's mother	a	1	P	1
Unknown	a	1	1	2
Total	7	13	10	30

1. Due to the scarcity of customary marriages with subsequent conjugal co-residence, very few children are able to reside with both parents.

2. Due to the instability of customary marriage, chances of residing with both parents diminish as children grow up, since it is likely that their parents divorce in course of time.

3. The oft-heard remark that young girls easily shift responsibility for a child upon their mother or other relatives is not borne out by our sample. It is true that other relatives share shouldering the burden, but it does not frequently occur that a mother leaves the child entirely to them, especially not when the child is still small (below 6 years). When this happened it was mainly in cases where the mother was a prostitute in Accra. In such cases it is possible that the initiative was not taken by the mother but by some worried relative, as the following case illustrates.

#### *Case 6. The Worried Grandmother*

Abena Oboo got a child when she was about 16 years old. The father of the child married her after childbirth, but later on they divorced and Abena went with her child to Accra to join her "sister" who lives mainly by prostitution. Rumours reached Kwahu that she did not look after the child well. Sometimes, it was told, she went out leaving the child behind, crying and hungry. One day her former husband's mother came to Accra and took the child with her to Kwahu. The child was taken about 3 years old.

4. A fourth point that is strongly suggested by our sample is that in the social environment of our lineage—men get away rather easily from their responsibility as fathers. It is mainly the mother and/or her relatives who look after children who are born outside marriage or in marriages that have broken down. As a result, the paternal role among the younger generation seems drastically curtailed. Socialization and child-training are becoming an all-women's affair, due to the absconding of the men.

The male point of view on marriage is illustrated by the following case:

#### *Case 7. The Calculating Lover*

Taylor, a Fante, who is the father of the third child of a young woman in the sample, says he did not marry the woman because her mother was too demanding. She wanted him to give

every month 12 out of his 19 cedis salary to her daughter. Taylor has decided not to marry at all, but only to entertain lover relationships. Women ask too much, he says, so it is not advisable for a poor man to marry. If you have plenty of money it is a different matter. Taylor claims that he gives one or two cedis to the child every month. As for his girlfriends, he gives them a cloth three times a year. That is cheaper than being married to them!

Women in the lineage were little concerned about this male absence as long as the father or his family paid their monthly contribution toward the upkeep of the child(ren). So the father's participation in the upbringing of children seemed, in a number of cases, to have been reduced to that of financial assistance. The Twi sentence "*Hwan na ohwe akwadaa no?*" (approximately: who is looking after the child?) was several times understood as: Who provides the money? and as such was answered with: The father. The idea that a father has a unique role to play in the socialization process appeared to have been given little thought.

But even this financial aspect of child-care was often neglected by the father. Although most men in the sample claimed to pay monthly instalments for their children, in a couple of cases it was found with certainty that this was not true. Sometimes the father was even totally unable to pay anything as has been shown in Case 1 and also in the next case.

#### *Case 8. A Poor "Husband"*

When Kwasi Ntiri's girlfriend became pregnant and brought forth a child, Ntiri was not able to give her anything for the child, as he said. He therefore told the girl to come and stay with his mother so that she could help his mother and eat from her farm. (Understandably) the girl refused and her father advised her to leave Ntiri, which she did.

In at least two cases male members of the lineage were even denied the recognition of paternity of a child which they claimed was theirs. The reason was clear: relatives of the girl thought the man unfit to father "their" child. One of them is set out in case 9:

#### *Case 9. The School-boy-father*

Kwame Amoa: "I loved this girl but did not intend to marry her. I was still in school. However I reckoned with the possibility that I should have to marry her after she had become pregnant. After her sixth month she went to Ho to inform her parents about her pregnancy and that I was the one who had caused it. Later on she wrote me a letter that her parents did not want her to marry a Kwahu, because I might kill the child in order to get money. A second reason was that I was still a schoolboy, just a kid, and would not be able to support her. They did not want my name to be mentioned any more in connection with the pregnancy. It seems they found a second candidate to marry her."

It could be asked whether the processes described above of marriage and filiation contrast sharply with those of the past. The answer is yes and no.

Premarital pregnancies are no new phenomenon in the lineage under study. Such cases are remembered as far as memory goes. An old woman between 80 and 90 years, for example, told us the following story about herself.

#### *Case 10. An old Woman's Confession*

"When I was about 4 years old, I was betrothed to one Owusu, but when I grew up I did not like the man. So I refused to marry him. Owusu collected back his 3 pounds plus a fine of 2 pounds. By that time I had been made pregnant by a man called Wiafe. Owusu became



angry with Wiafe and blamed him for the fact that I had refused to marry him, saying, 'So, you changed the mind of my wife.' This remark annoyed Wiafe and he also refused to marry me. After Wiafe broke with me, he did not care any more for the child, but his sister sometimes gave him (the child) money to buy food."

Similar stories were told by other members from the oldest to the younger generation.

Instability of marriage in the family is no new development either. The divorce rate has been constantly very high for the last 100 years, as already stated.

The incidence of "illegal" marital unions in the past is difficult to check. Old lineage members tend to embellish the past and may further forget short-lived unions of long ago. The impression remains, however, that free marriage was not uncommon in the past.

Residence with only one parent or non-parental residence of children has always been a common feature in the lineage. We interviewed 27 people who now have young children about the person they were staying with when they were six years old. Only five were staying with both parents; 10 were with the mother; four with the father; and eight with other relatives. At the age of 14 (26 interviewed) only one was staying with both parents; four with the mother; five with the father; and the remaining 16 with other relatives.

But not all aspects of the present situation look like a continuation of the past; two aspects in particular are radically different. The first is the reluctance of young people to enter (or re-enter) a recognized marriage union, and the subsequent postponement of the marriage age. Although a certain disenchantment with marriage was observed by some members of the older generation, it was never evident on such a large scale.

The second is the increase of geographical mobility. In the past residence with the mother did not cut the child off from contact with the father and vice versa, since both were normally staying in the same town. Children moved daily up and down between their mother's and their father's house for bringing food and other errands. It enabled the father to exercise his influence upon the training of the child even when it was staying with the mother. This possibility has been greatly reduced in the present time now that many parents live long distances from one another. Residence with only one parent was formerly partly a result of duolocal marriage residence and partly of the brittleness of marriage. Among the present generation the root of the problem does not lie with marital residence but with the current malaise in which marriage finds itself.

On the surface, therefore, the high frequency of denuded families as a result of temporary sexual unions and broken marriages may not seem to create a new situation in this Kwahu lineage. Long lasting co-residential unions have for at least 100 years been exceptions and children have been staying with only one of their parents for a long time. In reality, however, children have never before been so deprived of their fathers as among the present generation in the lineage under study. Furthermore, this happens in a time when there is evidence that elite groups of the same society are gradually shifting in the opposite direction.

## Conclusion

Contrary to expectations based upon studies of elite families and contrary also to their own ideals, the young people of the Kwahu lineage studied do not have stronger marital ties than their parents. It was found rather that the institution of customary marriage seems to be disintegrating among them. The majority were seen to be reluctant to marry and of those who



did marry many divorced again. Looser and more temporary types of sexual unions appear to be taking the place of customary marriage among them.

It was clearly observed that when children were born to these young people, it was usually the mother and/or her relatives who bore the brunt of looking after the child. The men tended to escape their responsibilities as fathers quite easily.

Thus in the socialization process of the child observed in this Kwahu lineage, the role of the father seems to be seriously reduced and unilateral filiation to the matrilineage looks even more prominent than in the past. For the ordinary man (woman) the ideal expressed by some of a small co-resident conjugal unit of husband, wife and child appears to be a long way off.

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